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Harmonization of indicators and reporting on progress towards the millennium development goals

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-third session.[a] The report describes follow-up to the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair expert group on development indicators that were endorsed by the Statistical Commission at its last session in 2002. The report also describes the activities of the United Nations Statistics Division in the preparation of data and analysis for monitoring progress towards the achievement of the millennium development goals.

The Commission is invited to review the proposed terms of reference for the standing committee on development indicators (see annex I) and to comment on the proposed activities of the Division in support of monitoring progress towards the millennium development goals.

[a] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2002, Supplement No. 4* (E/2002/24), chap. 1.A.

* E/CN.3/2003/1.

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I. Introduction

1. In the past year, the work on harmonization and rationalization of development indicators within the United Nations system has focused on the set of millennium indicators. The formulation of the millennium indicator set has stimulated the ongoing dialogue among United Nations agencies on common methodologies and on collaboration in data compilation. The strength of the millennium indicator set is that it provides an agreed starting point for global monitoring of targets and goals that have now been universally endorsed at the highest level. The specificity of other sets of United Nations conference indicators remains important for more detailed monitoring in various policy areas. In this context, it is also important to note that a considerable effort was made to align the millennium development goals framework to existing indicator sets.

2. Recent work of the United Nations Statistics Division has primarily focused on two areas with respect to development indicators: (a) following-up the Economic and Social Council's mandate to harmonize and rationalize conference indicators, the Division worked on the implementation of the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair as approved at the last session of the Statistical Commission;[1] and (b) the Division took the lead in preparing for the Executive Office of the Secretary-General the statistical base material and analysis for the annual report on progress towards the millennium development goals.

3. Both processes are described in more detail in sections II and III below. Furthermore, a proposal is made to involve the Commission's Standing Advisory Committee on Development Indicators in the improvement of the meta-data for the millennium development goal indicators, thus establishing a connection between the two processes and addressing the concern voiced by the Commission at its thirty-third session about the coordination between the various indicator sets.[2]

II. Harmonization and rationalization of conference indicators

A. Background

4. At its substantive session of 2000, the Economic and Social Council reiterated its interest in the topic of statistical indicators to follow up major United Nations conferences and summits held in the 1990s. In its resolution 2000/27, the Council reaffirmed recommendations contained in an earlier resolution on indicators (see Council resolution 1999/55, sect. II) and took up many of its themes. Inter alia, the Council called for: (a) the need for statistical capacity-building; (b) the technical review of existing conference indicators and efforts to define a limited set; (c) the need for so-called "means of implementation" or "global partnership for development" indicators; and (d) the promotion of networking. The Council requested the Secretary-General to report to it on the implementation of resolution 2000/27 at its substantive session of 2002.

5. At its thirty-second session, the Commission accepted the invitation by the Council to serve as the intergovernmental focal point for the review of conference indicators and considered that work as a welcome opportunity to contribute its technical expertise to the ongoing debate on indicators.[3] In order to ensure that the statistical expertise of member States be fully applied, the Chairman of the

Commission appointed a Friends of the Chair advisory group to conduct an in-depth technical evaluation of all United Nations conference indicators.[4] In accordance with the Council mandate, the Friends of the Chair advisory group was also requested to elaborate recommendations for a limited list of indicators and to make proposals for a mechanism of statistical review for future indicators.

6. The Friends of the Chair advisory group reported back to the Commission at its thirty-third session (see E/CN.3/2002/26). The Commission considered the report, together with the report of the Secretary-General on the harmonization of development indicators (E/CN.3/2002/25) and a consultancy report entitled "Indicators on means of implementation". The Commission welcomed the report of the Friends of the Chair and was particularly satisfied with the broad consultative process it undertook among member States. It welcomed the indicator architecture built on three tiers and the technical evaluations contained on the United Nations Statistics Division web site and endorsed the recommendations made in the report. The Commission also concurred that in some areas (e.g., human rights and good governance indicators), the indicators currently proposed were mostly qualitative in nature and could therefore not be technically evaluated by the Friends of the Chair group. Therefore, in case a consensus among member States is reached to use such indicators, from a technical statistical point of view further work would be required to clarify concepts and methods.

7. Based on the report of the Friends of the Chair and the decisions taken at the thirty-third session of the Commission, the Division prepared a report for the Council (see E/2002/53).[5] To date, the Council had not yet concluded its consideration of the report.

B. Follow-up to the recommendations of the Friends of the Chair endorsed by the Commission

8. The recommendations contained in the report of the Friends of the Chair fall into three broad categories: (a) recommendations that require action by the United Nations Statistics Division; (b) recommendations that require action by other stakeholders; and (c) recommendations of a more general nature. One example for the latter is recommendation 16: "That if the data source supports an analysis by sex then this should be provided for all indicators". The paragraphs below describe the follow-up activities for recommendations that fall into the first two categories, giving particular attention to those that were highlighted by the Commission at its thirty-third session.

9. The Commission endorsed establishing a standing committee for indicators, supported by the Division as its secretariat (recommendation 6). In close collaboration with the Bureau of the Commission, the Division has developed provisional terms of reference and a list of 10 members for the Standing Advisory Committee on Development Indicators. Both are attached to the present report (see annexes I and II). All 10 members approached have agreed to participate in the Committee.

10. The main task of the proposed standing committee will be to periodically update the indicator framework provided in the Friends of the Chair report, in response to United Nations summits and major international conferences and taking into account development of indicators within international agencies and advances

in technical standards (recommendation 1). Now that the millennium development goals list of indicators has been finalized for United Nations Millennium Declaration follow-up reporting to the General Assembly, the full list should be included in tier 1 of the Friends of the Chair "Hierarchy of statistical indicators" (see E/CN.3/2002/26, table 1), with appropriate technical notes. The implications of the list for needed programmes of capacity-building in countries should also be considered. At the same time, it is recognized that the set of millennium development goals indicators will need to evolve in the short run and over time to take into account additional commitments made by member States. Currently, discussions are under way in the United Nations system on follow-up to the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico, in March 2002, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002. The proposed standing committee should open a dialogue with the concerned stakeholders (United Nations system organizations, intergovernmental bodies and technical specialists) to review required and proposed indicators according to their technical merits. With respect to the Johannesburg Summit, the note by the Secretary-General on the World Summit on Sustainable Development and its possible implications for the work of the Statistical Commission (E/CN.3/2002/33) could provide a starting point.

11. It is furthermore suggested that the Committee re-examine the meta-data presented in the "Friends of the Chair" indicator meta-database hosted by the Division (see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/indicatorfoc) and advise the Division on how to best use its content to improve the newly created Division millennium indicator web site (see http://millenniumindicators.un.org). Improvement of the meta-database for the millennium indicators will not only enhance the transparency of the millennium indicators, but also help to clarify outstanding conceptual and methodological problems that still need to be addressed. Furthermore, comprehensive meta-data, including detailed conceptual and methodological notes, are helpful for countries that wish to assess and ultimately improve their capacity to compile specific indicators in the future.

12. In that context and in response to recommendation 14, the Commission will have before it a background note reporting on the availability of indicators in the highest two tiers. The report will include an assessment of what actions will be needed in the future to improve the worldwide coverage of those indicators. That analysis is meant to assist the debate on how to use scarce human and financial resources most effectively to support countries in their efforts to improve national statistical capacity.

III. Reporting on progress towards the millennium development goals

A. Background

13. In September 2000, 147 heads of State and Government and 189 nations adopted the Millennium Declaration. The objective of the Declaration is to promote a comprehensive approach and a coordinated strategy, tackling many problems simultaneously across a broad front. The General Assembly also mandated the Secretary-General, in its resolution 55/162, to prepare a comprehensive report every

five years, supplemented by an annual report on progress achieved towards implementing the Declaration.

14. To help track progress, the development experts of the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, derived from the Millennium Declaration a framework of measurable goals and targets for combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. The agency representatives, in consultation with other statistical experts, also proposed a set of indicators drawing on previous work on the United Nations Development Assistance Framework/ common country assessment indicators, for monitoring progress in relation to targets and goals as set out in the declaration (see A/56/326).

15. Subsequently, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in its capacity as chair of the United Nations Development Group, agreed to cooperate in preparing the quantitative assessments on developmental goals as a basis for the annual reports of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly. It was also decided that the United Nations Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs would be responsible for providing the statistical basis for a review of global progress towards the millennium development goals, while the United Nations Development Programme would support United Nations country teams to assist countries in preparing their national reports.

B. Global monitoring process

16. The Division and the Executive Office of the Secretary-General organized two inter-agency expert group meetings in New York in March and April 2002, bringing together experts from United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and from the International Monetary Fund, OECD and the World Bank (15 agencies were represented), as well as expert statisticians from selected countries. The experts at the two meetings reviewed the millennium development indicators in terms of their relevance to the targets and goals addressed, the availability of the necessary data, issues of data accuracy, concepts and definitions, geographical coverage, and consistency over time for the calculation/estimation of regional and global figures for the two benchmark years (1990 and 2000). Agencies agreed on a timetable and assignment of responsibilities for the preparation of regional and global figures and analysis of the data.

17. Based on the data and analysis provided by the agencies as well as discussion at the two inter-agency and expert group meetings, the Division prepared a report on millennium indicators for use as a basis for the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly on the implementation of the Millennium Declaration (A/57/270; see also ST/ESA/STAT/120 and http://millenniumindicators.un.org).

18. Although the Secretary-General's report presents only regional and global data, the Division, in close cooperation with its partner agencies, also maintains the millennium indicator database, containing available country series of the indicators, as well as background series intended to supplement the basic 48 millennium indicators, for more in-depth analysis. The figures in the database are provided by the designated agencies and are those published in international sources — mostly

estimates or adjustments based on official international data-collection mechanisms from countries. The database is continuously updated and will form the basis for future reporting.

C. Improving data availability and quality

19. A prerequisite for effective global and national reporting is the availability of reliable and comparable country data for the compilation of the millennium development indicators. The limitations encountered in the data used for the 48 indicators can be categorized as follows:

- Gaps in international standards.
- Differences among countries in statistical standards used.
- Measurement problems linked to the nature of the phenomenon to be measured.
- Limitations and gaps in national statistical programmes in specific statistical areas.
- New statistical areas, with recent methodological development.

20. Some of the greatest problems of international standards seem to be manifest in the area of poverty measurement and the associated income and consumption surveys. In terms of measurement problems, significant gaps exist in wage employment and in employment data, although in that area international standards and recommendations are clear and are extensively documented in manuals and guidelines produced within the United Nations system. Existing standards are not always adequate to capture the different realities of working conditions in countries, especially in rural areas and in the informal sector. In terms of national programmatic capacities, there are many areas where gaps are evident, such as in vital registration systems (e.g., maternal, infant and child mortality data), administrative records of school enrolment and programmes for gathering environment data.

21. A necessary condition for the sustained improvement of available statistics for millennium development goals indicators, and for development indicators in general, is the strengthening of countries' statistical capacity. The millennium development goals indicators focus can be used to identify specific, key programmatic gaps for attention, including, for example, income and consumption surveys which provide the needed income data for poverty estimation according to various methodologies; purchasing power parities; health and epidemiological surveys in many areas (17 of the millennium development goals indicators are health or health-related); primary school retention and completion surveys; environmental indicators from various sources; trade analysis capability; and labour force surveys.

22. The preparation of the millennium development goals country reports, coordinated by UNDP, provides an opportunity to help build national capacity for the production, analysis and dissemination of data. The Division has discussed with UNDP ways of collaboration, including Division assistance in the preparation of millennium development goals country reports in selected countries, and the participation of the Division in the training workshops held by UNDP to assist

country teams in the preparation of national reports. The Division also sees that collaboration as an opportunity to assess countries' statistical needs and to keep millennium development goals reporting closely linked to national statistical programmes.

23. Finally, the country-based information compiled and analysed by United Nations country teams will be used as additional input — in addition to international sources — for the report to the General Assembly.

IV. Future work

24. The Division will:

(a) Provide secretariat services to the Standing Advisory Committee on Development Indicators;

(b) Focus on the following with respect to millennium development goals indicators: (i) coordinating the work on data compilation and analysis for the global reporting on progress towards the millennium development goals, (ii) promoting further dialogue among agencies and with countries on the methodological development and establishment of international standards, where needed, and (iii) providing technical assistance to countries, in cooperation with United Nations country teams;

(c) Maintain the process for the preparation of the 2002 global report on progress towards the achievement of the millennium development goals since it has been proven effective. An inter-agency expert group meeting is planned for March/April 2003 to ensure full participation and effective coordination among partner agencies. The meeting will review the current status of available data necessary for the compilation of the millennium indicators and discuss the methodological work needed on some areas;

(d) Continue its work to maintain and regularly update the millennium indicators web site at http://millenniumindicators.un.org. In order to ensure consistency between figures used for global monitoring, those presented in the country series on the Division web site and those contained in other United Nations system agencies' databases, the Division will continue to promote and facilitate a dialogue on those issues among partner agencies.

V. Points for discussion

25. The Commission may wish to:

(a) Review the proposed terms of reference for the Standing Advisory Committee on Development Indicators (see annex I);

(b) Comment on the proposed Division activities in support of monitoring progress towards the millennium development goals.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Supplement No. 4* (E/2002/24), para. 66 (b).

[2] Ibid., para. 66 (e).

[3] Ibid., para. 45 (a).

[4] For that purpose, the United Nations Statistics Division had compiled from United Nations documents a list of approximately 280 indicators which were being used, or which were proposed to be used, in the context of follow-up to United Nations conferences and summits.

[5] The report is available on the Economic and Social Council web site at http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc/document.htm.

Annex I

Terms of reference for the Standing Advisory Committee on Development Indicators

Background

1. In its resolution 2000/27, the Economic and Social Council requested the Statistical Commission, as its authoritative technical advisory body, to:

- Provide leadership in the field of conference indicators.
- Conduct an in-depth technical analysis of conference indicators.
- Make recommendations regarding a limited list of conference indicators.
- Develop and recommend to the Council a mechanism of statistical review for future proposed indicators.

2. As a result, at its thirty-second session, the Commission established a Friends of the Chair group to consider those issues further and report to it thereon at its thirty-third session. The group was led by Professor Tim Holt (United Kingdom), and its final report (E/CN.3/2002/26) contained 31 recommendations (see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/sc2002.htm). Inter alia, the report recommended that the Commission "establish a standing committee to take responsibility for indicator issues and to act on behalf of the Commission between meetings to ensure that no undue delay occurs". The Commission welcomed the report and endorsed the recommendations made in it, in particular the recommendation on "establishing a standing committee for indicators, supported by the United Nations Statistics Division as the secretariat. That would enable the Commission and the regional and the national statistics systems to remain engaged in a dialogue with international, regional and national policy makers, and in particular to be involved at an early stage in the future development of new indicators."

Tasks

3. The Committee will maintain the framework provided by the Friends of the Chair's report. This includes: (a) establishing new indicators in response to future United Nations conferences and summits; (b) keeping under review the proposed hierarchical framework and priorities; and (c) reviewing and refining existing indicators over time. In particular, the Division, in close cooperation with the lead policy officials and as a result of the consultation process recommended in paragraph 100 of the Friends of the Chair's report, will prepare recommendations for the Committee. The Committee may request its secretariat to investigate certain related issues and prepare a brief report. The Committee will review those recommendations and either act on behalf of the Commission or itself prepare recommendations for the Commission, as appropriate. In that process, the Committee will take care that the criteria for selecting indicators that were developed by the Friends of the Chair (paras. 52-55 of the Friends of the Chair report) are being applied. Furthermore, the Committee will be responsible for the periodic review and improvement of all statistical indicators, and when such a review results in change, should provide an approach to support countries in moving to the improved indicator while maintaining continuity with the recent past. Those

periodic reviews of individual statistical indicators within the framework should be included within the appropriate work programmes of statistical review and revision that are regularly reported to the Commission.

4. The Committee will continuously improve the United Nations Statistics Division meta-data web site http://unstats.un.org/unsd/indicatorfoc/ and pay particular attention to the health and nutrition indicators.

Administrative issues

5. The Committee will conduct all its business electronically and will be supported by the Division, which will act as its secretariat.

6. The Committee will provide ad hoc reports to the Commission either at the request of the Commission or on its own initiative.

7. The Commission may review and change the membership of the Committee at each session.

Annex II

Proposed list of members for the Standing Advisory Committee on Development Indicators

Australia

Brazil

Hungary

Indonesia

Italy

Malaysia

Norway

Palestine

South Africa

United Kingdom